

Discipline Formation and the Field of Information

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ABSTRACT

The field of information as expressed in the iSchool Caucus is in many respects a conglomeration of disparate elements. It includes, for example, elements of several major traditions of information organization (commonly expressed as service professions) and the social institutional ties and contexts that some of them entail. In addition the field has also gathered under its umbrella an impressive array of such other elements as aspects of cognitive studies, social studies of the users and use of information, studies and services related to the Internet and World Wide Web, digital libraries and other systems that have no particular social institutional setting, digitization initiatives, not least among which are growing museum and digital archives movements, studies related to information systems of all kinds (e.g., interface design, usability testing, security), social issues of information property and rights, and the entire array of informatics initiatives, to name only some of the whole. Within this enlarged context, one issue of significance is the role of discipline formation, where the latter refers to efforts to identify a fundamental phenomenon related to larger core professional activities and explain aspects of that phenomenon through scientific methodology and objectivity.

The purpose of this paper is to use two examples of discipline formation within traditions of information organization (Bibliography and Computerized information storage and retrieval) as a basis for enriching and provoking our contemporary understanding of discipline formation within the field of information. As such, it focuses on the fourth review criterion of the iSchool Caucus program: “develops intellectual geographies in which attendees can learn about intellectual domains not their own but part of the multi-disciplinary iSchool space.”

Background

A tradition consists of a cluster of activities, objects, and ideas that are handed down from generation to generation in human society. Each such tradition gains adherents and subsequently evolves and shifts through endogenous and exogenous factors. A tradition of information organization has to do more specifically with activities and ideas related to organizing information objects and the information embedded in such objects. Traditions of information organization go beyond practical techniques. For example, they include ideas related to values that are attributed by their adherents to information objects as objects and the information they contain and to the roles and uses of such objects and their informational content in society. All major traditions of information organization in the modern period have had their beginnings in the form of what today would be called service professions.

The Two Examples

Two traditions of information organization—Bibliography (over five centuries old) and Computerized information storage and retrieval (CISAR), the latter encompassing a wide

variety of activities developed in the post-WWII era—provide a basis for raising questions about discipline formation within the field of information. Salient features include the fact that each took as its beginning point the identification, representation and item-by-item listing of documents deemed of value for their subject content. Each initially took on professional service ideals related to the crisis of providing access to burgeoning publications, especially in the realm of scholarly and scientific research. Despite such service profession orientations and unlike other traditions of information organization, each has been relatively free from the constraints of a specific social institutional setting. Each went through periods of attempting to describe and clarify what amounted to uncertain boundaries and often-changing content. Each developed commercial expressions of its work, though in the case of Bibliography commercial expressions came to be expressed chiefly in the form of two traditions of information organization—Indexing and Documentation—for which it was the principal seedbed.

Most significantly, each of these traditions gave rise to discipline formation within its boundaries—Bibliography in the form of Analytical (or Critical) bibliography, CISAR in the form of Bibliometrics and Computational information retrieval. Each effort in discipline formation had both positive and negative effects. Positive effects consisted of the satisfaction gained by its adherents of being able to state more precisely what their realm of scholarly endeavor entailed, an increase in scholarly status within the general academic community, and attendant increases in public acceptance and funding that an improved status generated. Negative effects included various expressions of alienation of the adherents in the parent tradition when those forming a disciplinary focus in this way attempted to distance themselves from the parent tradition, and the effect of criticisms of the scientific base of the new discipline that were generated because of the conflict involved.

Why This Matters

Discipline formation within the field of information seems inevitable or at least highly probable (if not already well underway) given the status that disciplinary work generates in the modern world. And given that inevitability or high probability, it seems appropriate to try to apply at least some of what occurred in the two instances described here to the current information field situation. However, taking such notice of such past developments and applying the latter to the present situation can best be done not in the form of predictions which are all but impossible, but by attempting to pose useful questions based on or at least provoked by relevant issues in the past.

A list of more general topics around which such questions might revolve include the existence of professional service ideals and their relationship to the idea of an academic discipline focus, the problem of defining boundaries and content of the field as a whole or of some elements of the field (e.g., an information organization tradition within the field), and the role of commercial parameters of the field. Topics more specific to discipline formation itself might include the importance of identifying a fundamental phenomenon to which rigorous scientific methods and explanation may be applied, how differing phenomena might yield different discipline formation efforts and how they might co-exist, and both positive and negative effects of discipline formation for the field as a whole. More specific questions might, for example, take the form of 1) Can information service profession needs co-exist with discipline formation within the information field and, if so, how? 2) What are the costs of severing ties (for various reasons) with parent traditions of

information organization and their social institutional settings ? 3) What might be expected in the way of idea interplay regarding the scientific basis and objectivity of a discipline within the larger information arena? 4) What might be the stance of the information field in general towards discipline formation that downplays scientific methodologies and explanations? Suggestions will be made about how to think about answers to questions such as these, though the purpose of raising them as well as reciting the comparison provided here that lies behind them and that prompted them is to provoke discussions as to what questions regarding discipline formation within the information field are the most important.